

A Sea Change in Eta Carinae^{1,2}

Andrea Mehner³, Kris Davidson³, Roberta M. Humphreys³, John C. Martin⁴, Kazunori Ishibashi⁵, Gary J. Ferland⁶, Nolan R. Walborn⁷

mehner@astro.umn.edu

ABSTRACT

Major stellar-wind emission features in the spectrum of η Car have recently decreased by factors of order 2 relative to the continuum. This is unprecedented in the modern observational record. The simplest, but unproven, explanation is a rapid decrease in the wind density.

Subject headings: circumstellar matter — stars: emission-line — stars: individual (eta Carinae) — stars: variables: other — stars: winds, outflows

1. Introduction

Today, 150 years after the close of its Great Eruption, η Car has not yet returned to thermal and rotational equilibrium (Maeder et al. 2005; Davidson 2005). This fact is important because the “SN impostor” phenomenon and its aftermath constitute a major gap in the theory of massive stars, and η Car is the only example that can be studied in detail; see reviews by many authors in Humphreys & Stanek (2005). Its recovery has been *unsteady*, with unexplained photometric and spectral changes in the 1890s and 1940s (Humphreys et al. 2008).

This object may have entered a phase of accelerated development 12-15 years ago. From 1953 to the mid-1990’s, ground-based ‘V’ photometry of star plus ejecta brightened at a rate of 0.024 mag/yr, with brief deviations smaller than ± 0.3 mag (Fig. 2 in Davidson et al. 1999a). In the past

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³Department of Astronomy, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455

⁴University of Illinois Springfield, Springfield, IL 62703

⁵Department of Physics, Nagoya University, Nagoya 464-8602

⁶Department of Physics & Astronomy, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506

⁷Space Telescope Science Institute, Baltimore, MD 21218

decade, however, it has risen 0.6 mag above that earlier trend line (Fig. 3 in Fernández-Lajús et al. 2009). The central star shows a more dramatic increase, a factor of more than 3 in UV-to-visual *Hubble Space Telescope (HST)* data since 1998 (Martin & Koppelman 2004; Martin et al. 2006; Davidson et al. 2009). A decrease in the amount of circumstellar dust may be responsible, but that requires some change in the wind and/or radiation field. Meanwhile the periodic “spectroscopic events” of 1998.0, 2003.5, and 2009.0, defined in §2 below, differed in major respects (Davidson et al. 2005; Richardson et al. 2010; Corcoran 2010). Very likely the mass-loss rate has been decreasing at an inconstant pace, while rotational spin-up may play a role (Humphreys et al. 2008; Martin et al. 2006; Davidson et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2003).

All those discussions, however, seemed to face an embarrassing observational contradiction. From the first *HST* spectroscopy in 1991 until the Space Telescope Imaging Spectrograph (STIS) failed in 2004, *η Car’s spectrum showed no major change* except during the temporary spectroscopic events. One might have expected some sort of spectral evolution to accompany the rapid brightening after 1998.

In this letter we report a novel development: Observations in 2007–2010 with Gemini/GMOS and *HST*/STIS reveal major spectral changes. They are not subtle; evidently the wind has been altered, at least temporarily and perhaps for the indefinite future.

2. Data and Analysis

For long-term trends we need quantitative spectra of *η Car* with consistent instrument characteristics, sampled over at least several years. Unfortunately no suitable data set exists prior to the *HST* observations, which began with the Faint Object Spectrograph (FOS) in the 1990’s (Davidson et al. 1995; Humphreys 1999), and continued with STIS after 1997. Here we use *HST* spectroscopy of the central star with spatial resolution better than $0.3''$, almost free of contamination by nearby ejecta. Gemini/GMOS spectra of the central $1''$ in 2007–2010 provide valuable independent information.

Eta Car has a complex 5.54-year spectroscopic cycle, most likely regulated by a companion star in an eccentric orbit, as discussed by many authors in Humphreys & Stanek (2005). (The periodicity was discovered in stages by Zanella et al. 1984, Whitelock et al. 1994, and Damineli 1996.) High-excitation emission lines temporarily vanish during periodic “spectroscopic events,” e.g., around 1998.0, 2003.5, and 2009.0, perhaps near periastron. The spectrum change described in this paper is more conspicuous than any of those events, and there is no strong reason to assume that it is related to the 5.54-year cycle. But such a linkage might exist, and in any case the cycle may influence any data comparison. Therefore we compare spectra at corresponding phases of successive cycles. Here “phase” is defined by $P = 2023.0$ days and $t_0 = \text{MJD } 50814.0 = \text{J1998.00}$,

consistent with the η Car HST Treasury Program Archive.¹ Phases 0.00, 1.00, and 2.00 mark the 1998.0, 2003.5, and 2009.0 spectroscopic events.

After a five-year hiatus, STIS obtained new spectra of η Car beginning in mid-2009. Our observations in August 2009 and March 2010 occurred at phases 2.10 and 2.20, and fortunately some STIS data had been obtained approximately one and two cycles earlier, at phases 1.12 in 2004 and 0.21 in 1999. It is also prudent to examine data sets taken one cycle apart during 1998–2004. Therefore we compare spectra of the star at phases 0.04 vs. 1.03, 1.12 vs. 2.10, and 0.21 vs. 2.20.² The 0.04/1.03 data were close to spectroscopic events but not within them; in most proposed orbit models they represent longitudes 100° – 140° past periastron, with star-star separations 2–5 times larger than at periastron. The 0.21/2.20 phases were well outside the events (Mehner et al. 2010; Martin et al. 2010).

Improved STIS data reduction techniques were developed for the η Car HST Treasury Program (Davidson 2006). However, in early 2010 the software has not yet been adapted to some format changes necessary for the new data. On the other hand the current STScI data pipeline could not easily be applied to some of the 1998–2004 data.³ Therefore we used Treasury Program methods for the 1998–2004 STIS data and the STScI pipeline for the 2009–2010 data. We extracted one-dimensional spectra of the star with a sampling width of $0.25''$. This was broader than we would have chosen if the Treasury Program techniques had been employed throughout, but it is narrow enough to exclude most of the ejecta.

In principle the use of two reduction procedures might cause illusory spectrum differences, but they would be no worse than a few percent. The $0.25''$ extraction width amounts to 5 CCD rows, broad enough for good agreement in the interpolation and integration steps. These statements are confirmed by random checks of a few 1998–2004 spectra reduced by both methods. We also examined semi-raw data files – flat-fielded and with cosmic ray hits removed, but otherwise unprocessed – and they show the same large effects as the reduced spectra (§3 below). Our results do not depend on absolute flux calibrations or precise spatial sampling.

We verified and extended our findings with Gemini/GMOS observations in 2007–2010, reduced with the Gemini IRAF package. They sampled wavelengths 3600–7200 Å with slit width $0.5''$, see Martin et al. (2010).

¹ <http://etacar.umn.edu/>; see comments at the end of §2 in Mehner et al. (2010).

² Calendar dates 1998-03-19/2003-09-22, 2004-03-07/2009-08-19, and 1999-02-21/2010-03-03; MJD 50891/52904, 53071/55062, and 51230/55258.

³ The reason was merely a lack of certain wavelength calibration files which are otherwise irrelevant here.

3. Results

During 1991–2004, HST/FOS and HST/STIS showed no definite secular change in η Car’s stellar wind spectrum. The $H\beta$ equivalent width, for instance, varied only $\pm 10\%$ (r.m.s.) outside spectroscopic events (Davidson et al. 2005). Figure 1a illustrates the similarity of broad wind features in two successive cycles before 2004. The qualitative ground-based record from 1900 to 1990 shows no discernible instance of a change like that reported below; see many refs. in Humphreys et al. (2008).

The 2009–2010 STIS data, however, reveal *the weakest broad-line spectrum ever seen in modern observations of this object*, relative to the underlying continuum. We notice several effects:

1. Low-excitation emission created in the stellar wind became far less prominent. For example, Fig. 1 shows blends of Fe II, [Fe II], and Cr II near 4600 Å. Phases 0.04 and 1.03 (1998 and 2003) were mutually consistent, but W_λ decreased by factors of 2–4 between phases 1.12 and 2.10 and likewise between 0.21 and 2.20 (Table 1). Most of the broad lines originate in the primary star’s wind, see many papers and refs. in Humphreys & Stanek (2005).
2. The profile of $H\alpha$, the strongest emission line in the violet-to-red spectrum, is altered and weakened in the recent STIS data (Fig. 2). $H\alpha$ had a low flat-topped profile during the 2003.5 event and then partially recovered (Davidson et al. 2005); but now it is even weaker (Table 1). The narrow $H\alpha$ absorption near -145 km s^{-1} indicates unusual nebular physics far outside the wind (Johansson et al. 2005). Always present in 1998–2004, this feature had weakened by 2007 but reappeared during the 2009.0 event (Ruiz et al. 1984; Davidson et al. 1999b, 2005; Martin et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2010). By March 2010 it had practically vanished.
3. High-excitation He I emission did not weaken along with the features noted above, but the P Cyg *absorption* features of helium greatly strengthened after the 2009 event, Fig. 3. This requires caution because He I varies intricately during each cycle. Note, however, that only a few occasions in 1998–2004 showed absorption as deep as that seen at phase 2.20 in March 2010; and phase 0.21 showed practically none.

Table 1 lists the equivalent widths of emission and absorption features mentioned above. Similar changes occurred throughout the violet-to-red wind spectrum. UV emission lines around 2600 Å weakened relative to the continuum, while the overall brightness in that wavelength region increased by 20–30% between August 2009 and March 2010. STIS observations by other researchers in June 2009, covering a smaller set of wavelengths, are consistent with our results.⁴

Gemini/GMOS observations in 2007–2010 confirm the reality of these spectrum changes, Figure 1d. In 2010 the GMOS data show stronger emission lines than STIS does (Fig. 1d vs. 1c), merely

⁴ *HST* program 11506; K. S. Noll, B. E. Woodgate, C. R. Proffitt, & T. R. Gull.

because the $1''$ ground-based spatial resolution allows significant contributions by ejecta far outside the stellar wind. Nevertheless, equivalent widths of low-excitation emission blends in the GMOS data decreased by factors of about 2 between June 2007 and March 2010. Most of our GMOS data at intermediate times were of lower quality, but they strongly suggest that the spectral change was progressive rather than abrupt.

4. What has happened?

We emphasize that the *stellar wind* emission lines have weakened relative to the continuum; outlying ejecta will require a separate investigation. The simplest explanation is a decrease in η Car’s primary wind density, which seems natural for the long-term recovery as well as other recent data (Davidson et al. 2005; Martin et al. 2006; Humphreys et al. 2008; Kashi & Soker 2009a; Martin et al. 2010). The surprise is in the rapidity of this development. Long ago it was expected that after the year 2050 this object will appear much as it did to Halley and Lacaille three centuries ago, a hot fourth-magnitude star with a transparent rather than opaque wind (Davidson 1987). But now the schedule appears to be accelerated; if the recent trend continues (which we cannot predict), the star will approach that goal in only a decade. Even if the spectrum regresses to its earlier state, these developments are crucial because the observational record shows no precedent for them.

The effects reported in §3 do not match the standard traits of Luminous Blue Variables (Humphreys & Davidson 1994). The energy carried by η Car’s wind surpasses a bright classical LBV by a factor of 100 or more, and its emission lines are far stronger. When an LBV experiences a major eruption its wind becomes opaque, cools below 9000 K, and develops a rich absorption-line spectrum within a few months. Visual wavelengths brighten but the UV correspondingly fades. Something like that did happen to η Car around 1890; but its recent record, by contrast, shows no perceptible decrease in the UV/visual flux ratio. “LBV” is not a very satisfactory label for this object, since much of its 1830–2010 behavior does not fit that category well. If the recent change proves to be an increase rather than a decrease of the wind – i.e., contrary to the hypothesis that we favor – then η Car may soon mimic a third-magnitude F-type supergiant!

Other alternatives to the decreasing-wind interpretation include, e.g., a change in the latitude-dependence of the wind (Smith et al. 2003), or the unusual models for η Car favored by Kashi & Soker (2007, 2009a,b). Many complications exist. For instance, a lessened wind density should cause the photosphere (located in the opaque wind) to shrink and become hotter, eventually leading to a *decrease* in visual-wavelength flux. Indeed this may have occurred in 2006 (Fernández-Lajús et al. 2009; Martin et al. 2010), but circumstellar dust and other factors probably dominate.

Numerous observables figure in the problem. For example, in §3 we mentioned that He I lines have behaved differently from the lower-excitation features. Helium emission and absorption processes in η Car’s wind depend on the companion star and have other special characteristics, see

§6 of Humphreys et al. (2008). Also relevant are the 2–10 keV X-rays formed in the wind-wind collision zone. Kashi & Soker (2009a) have suggested that the earlier-than-expected recovery of X-rays after the 2009.0 spectroscopic event may signal a decrease in the wind density. Independent of that problem, in early 2010 the 2–10 keV flux has been about 20% below the level seen in two previous 5.5-yr cycles (Corcoran 2010). This decrease is much less extreme than the spectroscopic changes described in §3 above; perhaps these effects depend on latitude differences between our direct view of the wind and conditions near the wind-wind shocks (Smith et al. 2003; Davidson 2005; Humphreys et al. 2008). Realistic wind models will need to be non-spherical and even non-axisymmetric.

Eta Car’s behavior may provide spectroscopic opportunities not foreseen until recently. For instance, if the wind becomes semi-transparent, then the temperature and radius of the primary star may become observable for the first time. Moderate-sized instruments are valuable because HST and large telescopes will provide, at best, only sparse temporal sampling. Fortunately, ground-based observations now show η Car – the star itself – more clearly than they did ten years ago, because the diffuse ejecta have not brightened as fast as the star. An obvious need is for *instrumentally homogeneous* series of spectra. Since the wind has characteristic size scales of several AU and velocities of several hundred km s^{−1}, changes may occur on timescales as short as a week.

Acknowledgements

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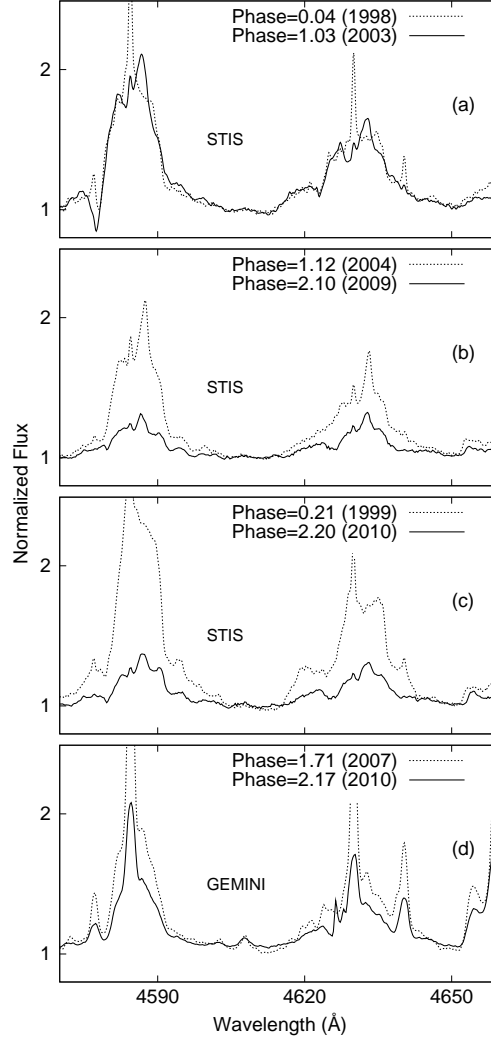


Fig. 1.— Blends of Fe II, [Fe II], Cr II, and [Cr II] near 4600 Å, 1998–2010. Flux is normalized to unity at 4605 Å. Panels (a,b,c) show HST/STIS data in successive spectroscopic cycles (see text), while (d) shows two Gemini/GMOS spectra. Spatial resolution was about 0.25'' for STIS and 1'' for GMOS. The *narrow* features are not crucial here, since they originate far outside the stellar wind; their decrease relative to the star may be merely an indirect consequence of changes in circumstellar extinction. The blends shown here are dominated by Fe II $\lambda\lambda$ 4584.1,4585.1,4630.6, [Fe II] λ 4641.0, and Cr II λ 4589.5.

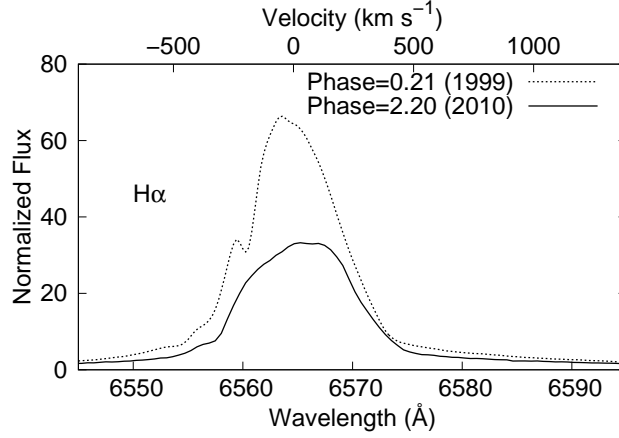


Fig. 2.— $H\alpha$ about 400 days after the 1998 and 2009 events. Flux is normalized to 1.0 at 6620 Å. Note the disappearance of external narrow absorption near -145 km s^{-1} .

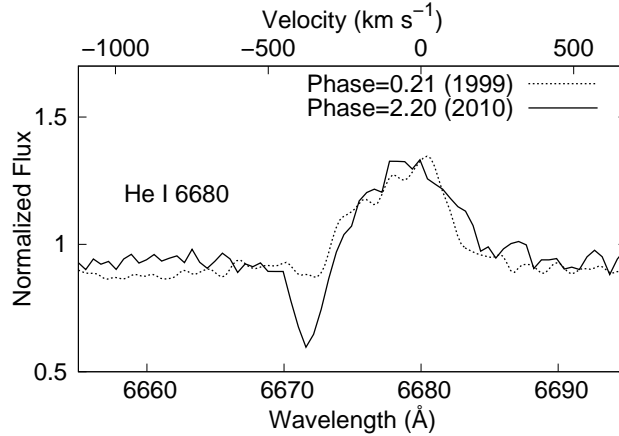


Fig. 3.— $\text{He I } \lambda 6680$ about 400 days after the 1998 and 2009 events. Flux is normalized at 6620 Å. The strengthened absorption feature is also seen in other He I lines such as $\lambda\lambda 4027, 4714$.

Table 1. Equivalent widths of some stellar-wind emission and absorption lines measured with STIS

Date	Phase	EW (Fe II, Cr II) ^a (Å)	EW (H α) ^b (Å)	EW _{abs} (He I 4714) (Å)	EW _{abs} (He I 6680) (Å)
1998-03-19	0.04	11.47	830.26	-0.06	-0.20
1999-02-21	0.21	17.79	899.37	-0.10	-0.01
2003-09-22	1.03	11.03	614.18	-0.11	-0.63
2004-03-07	1.12	9.69	822.71	-0.18	-0.59
2009-06-30 ^c	2.08	3.62	—	-0.47	—
2009-08-19	2.10	2.90	483.35	-0.61	-1.10
2010-03-03	2.20	3.89	492.73	-0.39	-0.70

^aMeasured between 4570 and 4600 Å, continuum at 4605 Å and 4744 Å.

^bMeasured between 6510 and 6620 Å, continuum at 6500 Å and 6620 Å.

^cH α and He I λ 6680 were not observed on this occasion.